

A Needed Change for the Scout Sniper Platoon

Subject Area General

EWS 2006

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February 7, 2006

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 07 FEB 2006		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE A Needed Change for the Scout Sniper Platoon				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps,Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University,2076 South Street, Marine Corps Combat Development Command,Quantico,VA,22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 9	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Introduction

In Iraq, Marine Corps scout snipers have been widely and effectively used to kill the enemy. They are highly skilled warriors whose actions and capabilities displayed in combat are feared by the enemy. Scout snipers are a combat force multiplier for any unit, and their capability to provide precise, long-range fire has repeatedly proven itself on multiple battlefields. However, this success did not come easy. It was made possible by developing new tactics, techniques and procedures that allowed the scout sniper to operate in the current environment. These tactics, techniques and procedures need to be captured in current doctrine. Specifically, a scout sniper platoon's task organization needs to be reorganized in order to capitalize on increased firepower and flexibility when operating on today's battlefield.

Background

A scout sniper platoon consists of a platoon commander or intelligence officer, a platoon sergeant, a chief scout sniper, and eight two-man sniper teams. According to doctrine developed at the end of the Vietnam War scout snipers should be deployed as two-man teams: one man is equipped with a sniper rifle while the other is equipped with a spotting scope.¹ The sniper teams often move around the battlefield with a security element but by doctrine are intended to be deployed independently to increase

the probability of operating undetected.² The battalion commander ultimately assigns their mission, and they conceptually become his "eyes" and "trigger finger."³ Their primary mission is to provide precision fire on selected targets from concealed positions in support of combat operations, and their secondary mission is to collect intelligence.⁴

Currently, the scout sniper task organization is designed for supporting a two-man team employment method. This task organization is based on experiences from past wars. It was not until the end of the Vietnam War when the Marine Corps started to acknowledge the value in sniping and openly began to develop formal schooling and doctrine.⁵ Because there have been only limited conflicts since the Vietnam War, this doctrine has only received minor changes. The Marine Corps scout sniper doctrine does receive updates and changes based on lessons learned; however, today's experiences in Iraq call for a closer in depth evaluation.

What changes are needed?

The current operating environment requires a sniper team to have more firepower and flexibility than in the past. In response to this shortfall, many commanders employed scout snipers in non-traditional methods with multiple attachments. These methods have proved effective and have been captured by lessons learned, but the lessons learned should also be used to

rewrite doctrine and to increase a scout sniper platoon's capabilities.

Firepower and Flexibility

On today's battlefield, primarily an urban environment, scout snipers are finding themselves decisively engaged for hours at a time. Consequently, some units are attaching corpsmen, fire teams, and even machinegun teams to four-man and six-man sniper teams. This is a far stretch from the doctrinal two-man team. In fact, the scout sniper platoon should be composed of three, ten-man squads. The increase in personnel is necessary to capitalize on the scout sniper's success. Each squad would consist of one squad leader, two snipers with M40 sniper rifles, one sniper with a .50 caliber Barrett, three observers, one machine gunner with an M240G, one assistant gunner, and one corpsman.

These three squads would provide the platoon more flexibility in order to accommodate the current challenges in Iraq. The platoon could internally task organize with the proper economy of forces to complete the mission. Also, the machine guns would provide the crucial firepower needed when engaged in a firefight.

Security is an issue for any unit on the battlefield. The issue is even greater for a sniper team. Battalion commanders have created several methods for organizing and employing their

scout snipers, all of which are based on providing security for the sniper team. The core reason battalions become creative in employment methods is to provide more security and to ensure the sniper team has enough combat power to deal with unplanned enemy contact. The proposed task organization sets a standard for employment methods and security, while maintaining the flexibility to be creative and adapt to the current environment.

The Marine Corps has made similar changes in the past. Due to a need to keep up with technology, the Marine Corps conducted significant changes in equipment. Prior to Desert Storm, the Marine Corps saw a need for a more precise .50 caliber rifle. In response, it quickly bought and employed the Barrett .50 cal special application scoped rifle, which proved to be a valuable asset. The Marine Corps has been in Iraq for several years now but has made no changes to the scout sniper platoon task organization in order to improve the way they are employed.

Counterarguments

Some would argue that assigning attachments in order to increase capabilities is the proper method. However, when an asset is attached, it is not organic to the team and has not trained with the team. A scout sniper's mission and training goes beyond that of the average infantryman. In one case, Sgt John E Place, a former scout sniper with 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, had his corpsman fill in as the observer after his

observer became wounded.⁶ The extent of the corpsman's training and knowledge of sniping is unknown; however, the example shows the need for the entire platoon to develop a habitual relationship and train together.

Changing the task organization of any unit presents challenges. These challenges include the reassignment of personnel, weapons, and equipment. However, these changes are minor due to the relatively small size of a sniper platoon and the many assets organic to an infantry battalion. Successful changes in task organization have already been demonstrated in Iraq as units adapt to the operational environment. As scout sniper platoons gain new organic capabilities, training and employment techniques would naturally progress. This progression would not only be integrated with current doctrine, but allow for new doctrine fitted for today's battlefield.

Conclusion

In Fallujah, during a three week time period, two sniper teams from 1st Battalion, 5th Marines had taken out over ninety enemy fighters.⁷ Their commander, Lieutenant Colonel Byrne, said of the scout snipers, "They've become the enemy's worst nightmare."⁸ In many other cities in Iraq, scout snipers led the fighting and allowed the freedom of movement to friendly units.⁹ Captain Douglas Zembiec described the scout snipers as the "true heroes" of the war.¹⁰ With such success on today's battlefield,

the scout sniper has become an asset which the Marine Corps should undoubtedly develop. A new and better task organization will capitalize on their success and provide them the firepower and flexibility needed on the current battlefield.

Word Count: 1,124

Notes

1. Scout Sniper Instructor School, Book Five: Sniper Employment (Quantico, VA 1996), 3.
2. Scout Sniper Instructor School, Sniper Employment, 3.
3. United States Marine Corps, FMFM 1-3B: Sniping, (Washington, D.C. 1984), 6-4
4. Scout Sniper Instructor School, Sniper Employment, 3.
5. Charles Sasser and Craig Roberts, *One Shot-One Kill* (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), 258-259
6. LCpl Ray Lewis USMC. "Scout sniper honored with silver star." (Marine Corps News, 2005), 1
7. Carol Rosenberg, "Wave an AK-47-meet a virgin," (Night-Ridder Newspaper, 2004), 1
8. Carol Rosenberg, "Wave an AK-47-meet a virgin," 2
9. Tony Perry, "Snipers are strategic weapons in Fallujah," (The Seattle Times, 2004), 3
10. Tony Perry, "Snipers are strategic weapons in Fallujah," 3

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